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LENT SERMON.

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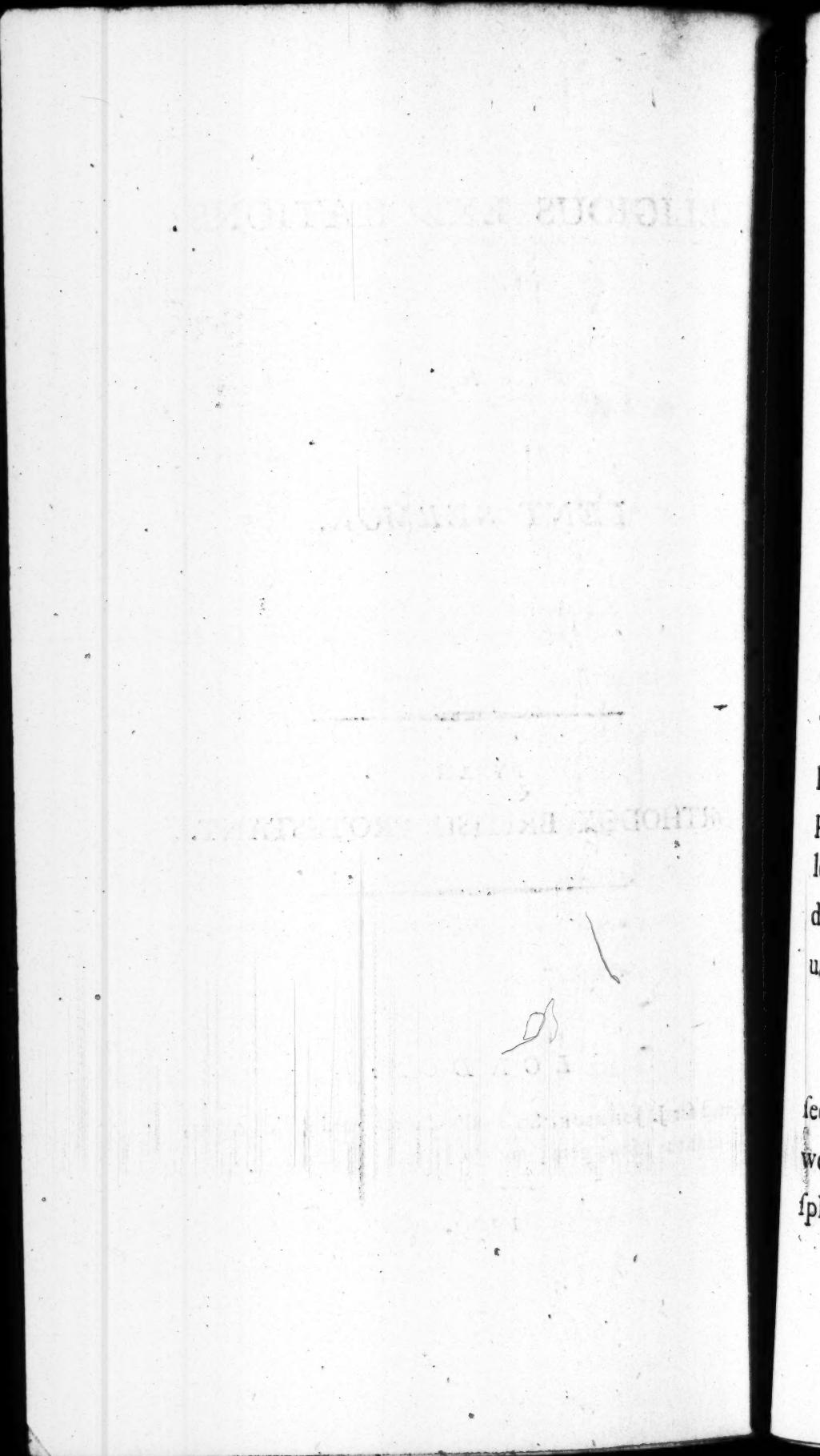
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1796.

II



ADVERTISEMENT.

IT having been asked by some, on occasion of a sermon on the last national fast, entitled, "The Pacific Temper of the Priesthood," published by the same author, where it was preached? while others questioned his letters of ordination—and even his orthodoxy: a few explanatory words may not be unseasonable.

With men whose approbation is worth seeking, doctrines acquire no additional weight from being delivered in the most splendid metropolitan cathedral, nor lose any portion

portion of their intrinsic value when they are traced to a dilapidated Highland kirk. None but bigoted sectaries can be ignorant, that the office of apostle is neither an inherent birthright, nor capable of being transmitted from hand to hand by the unworthy and ambitious, like such holy relics as the pretended mantle of Elijah, or the ideal keys of St. Peter.

The claims of nominal Scottish prelates, or those of presbyterian dissenters from the church of England, I leave to be more ably maintained by their respective adherents; but can, at the same time, have no hesitation in asserting, that ministers ordained, either by established and authenticated bishops on this side the Tweed, or in Scotland, by the elders of their national kirk, have in all places an equally unquestionable claim to the appellation of reverend. That discretionary motives may render the former

not

not eligible to hold preferment in the northern, or the latter in the southern part of this island, I can easily comprehend, and by no means presume to arraign the propriety of such regulations. But the main question, in regard to any individual being *duly sent* to preach the gospel, will not be brought nearer to a decision, from the circumstance of his having received “the right “hand of fellowship” at Lambeth, or in Edinburgh—it rests solely on his faith and moral conduct.

If I cannot entirely concur in opinion with those who object to all political discussions from the pulpit, the plea I would prefer making use of in their favour, is not so much their having any tendency towards edification, as because they introduce a kind of voluntary “Shibboleth;” a test which no man has a right to complain of, because it is entirely of his own seeking. We have seen

it

it acutely observed, that orators no sooner enter on topics so hazardous, than some of those who carried sanctified pretensions to the greatest height, clearly shew their total disbelief of those benevolent tenets which Jesus Christ came to inculcate. The sheep's clothing is by this method of proceeding totally cast aside, and the wolf appears in all his genuine deformity.

LENT SERMON.

NUMBERS, xxiii. 7, 8.

BALAK the king of Moab hath brought me from Aram, out of the mountains of the East, saying, "Come "curse me, Jacob, and come defy Israel." How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy whom God hath not defied?

MUCH instruction may be drawn from the conscientious scruples of characters by no means eminently virtuous. The boundary at which, after going considerable lengths, even such men make an abrupt stand, and resolutely declare, that no motives whatever shall tempt them to proceed any farther, ought not surely to be overleaped without an absolute certainty of our having chosen the right road.

The history of Balaam, taken in this point of view, may afford some remarks by no means

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inapplicable to the present awful crisis. We do not, I trust, assemble together like so many arrogant pharisees, to boast that we are righteous ; nor yet for the purpose of uttering maledictions against those with whom we are contending ; but in order to bewail our own manifold transgressions in sackcloth and ashes.

Escaped from the intolerable tyranny of Pharaoh, the Israelites having, after great difficulties, passed through the wilderness, pitched their tents in the plains of Moab. Balak, the king of that country, alarmed at their numbers, sent repeated messages, with considerable gifts, and offers of promotion, to Balaam, a distinguished soothsayer, who dwelt near the banks of Euphrates, requesting him to come, and curse the strangers who had migrated into his territories. One divine admonition to forbear from setting out on so invidious an errand, would have been sufficient to stop the man of real piety : but Balaam, thirsting after the wages of unrighteousness, was easily tempted by fresh and more flattering overtures ; he persisted in applying to the Lord, till his importunity at length obtained permission for him to accompany the princes of Moab. On his arrival, after previously declaring, that " If Balak would give him his house " full of silver and gold, he could not go beyond " the

"the word of his God to do less or more," he sought for enchantments: thrice he changed his position; thrice he sacrificed; and as often uttered, without any pusillanimous reserve, what genuine inspiration dictated to him; concluding with the following sublime eulogium on the posterity of Jacob: " He couched, he lay down " as a lion, and as a great lion. Who shall rouse " him up? Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and " cursed is he that curseth thee." Upon which the baffled monarch smote together his hands in anger, and commanded this interpreter of the will of Heaven to depart from his presence.

Here we may observe a singular instance of depravity mingled with conscientious resolution. Ambitious motives, vitiating that superior wisdom, that intimate knowledge of hidden things, with which the Creator had endowed Balaam, suggested a variety of evasions in hopes that he might at length avail himself of those lucrative offers which were held forth to him: while religion, at length inspiring a just sense of his duty, compelled him to utter such unwelcome truths, as totally kept him back from obtaining worldly honors.

On looking with an impartial eye into the records of human affairs, we shall feel ourselves

compelled to own, that Balaam's character, in its exceptionable part, has abundance of imitators; while he stands the almost solitary instance, of a prophet strongly actuated by mercenary views, and stepping beyond the limits of his duty; yet stedfastly refusing to go such lengths as might recommend him to the patronage of those who are invested with authority.

It is a melancholy consideration, but at the same time too obvious to be passed over in silence, that if any country produces statesmen, who, regardless of the miseries of its inhabitants, emulate the impetuous career of Jehu, the son of Nimshi, driving furiously; instances will not be wanting, even among the priesthood, of zealots qualified to keep pace with them. But in what light will religion appear to the ignorant multitude, if they who officiate in its mysteries, when the starving poor crave a respite from the horrors of war, instead of sympathising with their distress, are more prone to utter such taunts as those with which the sanguinary tyrant just mentioned, repeatedly insulted the messengers of Jehoram: "What hast thou to do with peace? "Get thee behind me."

How awfully have the warnings given by St. John to his Asiatic converts been fulfilled! The removal

removal of their candlesticks has been succeeded by darkness severely felt, and in every respect equivalent to that which by divine mandate overspread the whole land of Egypt. How many ostentatious and self-sufficient churches are there in the world at this present hour, who, falling far short in their merits of Sardis and Thyatira, are consequently by no means entitled to expect a milder doom !

A sense of shame constrains even vanity itself to remain silent, whenever the question is proposed—Whether, in modern days, we have improved in our moral conduct on that of our ancestors ? Many however insist upon it, that the present age has acquired variety of information ; and contend, that not only ornamental accomplishments are more generally diffused, but that the limits of our duty are marked out with a degree of accuracy unknown to former periods : but this assertion carries with it every appearance of being a mere idle boast.

In the earliest ages of the world, the immediate voice of the Creator, or of that conscience which he has implanted in every man's breast, failed not, in cases of emergency, to give the most forcible admonitions. As farther incitements to a virtuous life, the sons of Abraham had in-

structions communicated to them by Moses and the prophets, which He who knew what was in man pronounced to be fully equivalent to one rising from the dead. On these solid foundations was erected in later ages the superstructure of the gospel.—But what additional revelation has been communicated to those who sometimes affect to term themselves successors of the apostles? Every idle decoration which they have reared, will no doubt be swept away, like that house which the foolish man built upon the sand: a loss easily to be dispensed with if the corner-stone yet remain unmoved. After the tree has been planted in the vineyard, dug around and dunged, and is grown to sufficient maturity, what farther remains, but to see whether it bear fruit, or whether it must be cut down, and cease to cumber the ground?

Little can the first rudiments of christianity be understood in a diocese, where the assembled clergy, not in eagerness of debate, but in one of those public acts which are given under their common seal, solemnly implore the Supreme Being to “watch for evil” over any description of men, however deserving their conduct may have been of exemplary punishment.

The precepts of Jesus Christ, in regard to treating notorious offenders as heathens and publicans, together with the subsequent conduct of his apostles, are of a widely different nature. They whom we profess to follow as our examples, removed from the communion of the church such as by their ill conduct gave just cause of offence: but they proceeded no farther; they uttered no execrations, nor consigned transgressors either to imprisonment or the stake. Prudently considering their own frailty, lest they also should be tempted, these followers of a crucified Saviour gave directions for restoring in the spirit of meekness those who exhibited marks of contrition and amendment.

Among the most conspicuous instances of baffled malice which sacred history displays to us in its earlier pages, is that of five kings conspiring to smite Gibeon for having made peace with Joshua. The result of this abominable enterprise was, their being discomfited with great slaughter; many of their troops fell by the sword, and hail-stones from heaven destroyed a still greater number: to close the distressful scene, their royal leaders were ignominiously hanged up on five trees till the evening, when their bodies were removed for interment.

But the more immediate scope of my discourse is, to mention those violent words and actions which have been accompanied either by real or pretended devotion. Their evil consequences, taken in every point of view, it is unnecessary to treat of under a separate head, the punishment being usually found to tread close on the heels of the offence, both in ancient and modern records.

The triumphal song of Deborah and Barak, universally admired for its poetical energy, contains imprecations which at first sight carry with them the aspect of being authorised by more than human sanction: especially where we read;

“ Curse ye Meroz (said the angel of the Lord),
 “ curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof, be-
 “ cause they came not to the help of the Lord,
 “ to the help of the Lord against the mighty.”

But after consulting a variety of interpreters, we cannot find them accord in determining either what Meroz was, or where it was situated. At the same time, some are for exalting the angel here spoken of, into a personage of far greater rank than the expression made use of by any means authorises; while others give it as their opinion, that the word implies nothing more than the general of the army. The conclusion,
 “ So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord!”
 inclines

inclines us to adopt the latter construction. Zeal and true piety are by no means inseparable; and it is far from being a modern invention, first to call those against whom we are engaged in hostilities, "enemies to the Lord;" and then to proceed, as if we thought ourselves justified in every outrageous act of force or fraud which has their destruction for its object.

It cannot but be acknowledged, that Jotham's curses were dictated by most grievous provocations; and that their accomplishment took place at no very considerable distance from the time of their being uttered. Abimelech, the spurious son of Gideon, who had delivered Israel from the oppressive yoke of the Midianites, after his father's death, murdered all his legitimate offspring except Jotham the younger of fifty brethren; and assisted by his mother's relations, the house of Millo, whose influence appears to have been considerable, usurped the government of Shechem. Jotham escaped; and ascending the summit of mount Gerizim (which was consecrated for far different purposes, it being ordained by the law, that the priest should from thence bless the people), after calling with the utmost solemnity on the name of God, introduced his celebrated parable of the trees making the

the bramble their king. In the conclusion of that fabulous narrative, he inserted the following bitter imprecations :—that if they had dealt treacherously with the posterity of him who had adventured his life in their cause, “ let fire “ come out from Abimelech, and devour the “ men of Shechem and the house of Millo ; and “ let fire come from the men of Shechem and “ from the house of Millo, and devour Abime-“ lech.” Circumstantial as the evils he de-
nounced were, we find them fulfilled to the utmost.

In three years time a revolt broke forth, headed by Gaal : the conspirators cemented their union by religious observances : for it is recorded, that “ No sooner had they gathered in their “ vintage, than they assembled in the house of “ their god, and did eat and drink, and cursed “ Abimelech.” But ruin soon overtook them : being defeated in battle with much slaughter, they who escaped took refuge in a turret consecrated to their idol Berith ; the tyrant, pur-
suing with his victorious troops, set fire to it, and they all perished. In the next place, Abimelech, mortally wounded by a mill-stone which a woman threw down upon him, and thrust through at his own desire by his armour-
bearer,

bearer, thus miserably ended his life, at the moment when he was on the point of taking another citadel.

But on inquiring what fortunes attended Jo-tham, who thus anticipated future events in pronouncing the doom of his enemies, we gain no information of later date, than his flight into another country ; nor have the sacred historians ascertained, whether he died a fugitive, or returned home and passed the remainder of his days in obscurity. Thus much is evident from the context, that he never attained the rank of judge over Israel, which his father Gideon had so honourably occupied, nor was that sceptre transmitted to him which the vengeance of an oppressed people had wrested from the bloody hands of Abimelech.

So conformable to what might have been expected from Goliath, trusting in superior bodily strength, and threatening to give the flesh of his antagonist to the fowls of the air and to the beasts of the field, is the circumstance of his cursing David by his gods, that it might seem superfluous to expatiate on that subject. But we look for far other expressions from him who prevailed over the audacious giant of Gath, not “ with a sword, or with a spear, and with a shield,

“ but

" but in the name of the Lord of Hosts." Nor is it natural, that solemn devotional performances written in the closet, should breathe a similar spirit with words hastily uttered amidst the din of battle.

Much labor and ingenuity has lately been used in giving new interpretations to a variety of passages in the royal Psalmist, particularly those in which he has hitherto been understood to express himself with the utmost bitterness against persons who had injured or offended him: though such a similarity of character run through the whole, as gives them a strong tendency to corroborate each other. One insists upon their being prophetic denunciations; a second will have it, that they are only words put into the mouths of characters introduced into a dialogue. If the Hebrew text require the adoption of either signification, which I do not find has yet been clearly made out, silent acquiescence becomes us, who are less learned, and can trace our authorities no higher than from the Septuagint. In the mean time, it may not be wholly superfluous to inquire how far our own vernacular translations are synonymous with what is related in the scriptures of David's character and conduct during a long eventful reign.

On reading the annals of this Jewish sovereign, exalted above his contemporaries, not so much by his rank and victorious exploits, as from his being endued with the gift of prophecy ; the first thing that strikes those who are inclined to judge favourably of his conduct is, his being termed "a man after God's own heart." We find this language made use of by Samuel, on occasion of Saul having taken upon himself to officiate as priest in presenting burnt offerings. The phrase no doubt means, that David would be zealous in maintaining the true religion, at that time much endangered by idolaters, and those who practised the arts of divination, to which it is recorded that Saul himself ultimately had recourse.

In like manner Isaiah mentions the Lord calling Cyrus "my shepherd," on account of his sending back God's chosen people, the Jews, to their own country, after he had conquered Babylon, and broken the chains of their captivity. We can by no means infer from thence, that the merciful Creator of the universe approved all Cyrus's actions, especially that insatiable thirst for carnage which at length terminated in his own destruction.

Notwithstanding David's uncommon virtues and superior endowments, the sacred records inform us, that his guilt in various instances was of a more than questionable nature. Immoral actions still remain unaltered, whatever be the name or dignity of him by whom they are perpetrated. The treachery with which he acted towards Achish his protector; his cutting the vanquished inhabitants of Rabbah "with saws, " and with harrows of iron, and with axes;" his aggravated murder of Uriah; his numbering the people, though dissuaded by Joab; his dying injunction to his son Solomon, to bring down to the grave with blood the hoar head of Shimei, whom he had pardoned; with other instances, which it would be superfluous to enumerate, exemplify in David, that tyranny exercised, not only towards foreign nations, but also over his own subjects; which, according to the fore-warning voice of Samuel, awaited the Jews in consequence of their insisting upon having a king to rule over them.

From observing the benevolent tendency of the christian religion, as delivered in the precepts of Jesus, and his immediate followers, the apostles, we might expect to find its various sects united in the one great object, of loving each other as brethren, and exerting themselves with

with meekness and long suffering to bring unbelivers to a knowledge of the gospel. But on entering the perplexed wilderness of ecclesiastical history, scenes of a more discouraging nature present themselves to us.

Nothing can conduce less towards edification, than minutely tracing a long series of deviations from the strait road. Among the incompatible tenets of those who are recorded to have anathematised each other, and sometimes proceeded to yet more terrible extremities, it may frequently be difficult to ascertain which was most orthodox; but all must perceive, that such conduct has contributed to impede the progress of the christian religion beyond the most artful cavils of infidelity.

An infallible umpire to determine between those of jarring opinions, does not by any means seem the point most essential. Pretensions to superior attainments, and a propensity to look down with scorn on the illiterate, tend to keep up a spirit of party in the world. But if the leaders of each various sect, whether they bear the name of Paul or of Apollos, reverted more frequently to the original principles of their institution, they would insensibly form themselves into one compact body, having Jesus Christ for its

its head. But to this necessary reform, to which every true believer looks forward, as sooner or later to take place, the present system of human establishments opposes such bars, as are by those of grovelling spirits deemed insuperable. Hence arises the aversion which those, who, like Diotrephes, are eager after the preeminence, have uniformly manifested, to look back with an impartial eye, into the directions left behind, as universal rules for the church in all future ages, by Him whose kingdom was professedly not of this world.

One of the conflicts which St. Paul speaks of, as requiring "the whole armour of God" was, "against spiritual wickedness in high places." Elevated rank, united with pomp, with riches, and an emulation of the luxury of princes, would have disgusted, rather than flattered, the simplicity of those fishermen and tent-makers who were originally called to go forth and preach among all nations: unprovided even with coats and shoes for their journey, they had no comprehension that it was expedient to put on appearances, totally different from Him who sent them as his ambassadors. But a minute account of the corruptions of christianity would involve me in too large a field for inquiry.

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Under these circumstances, matters which bear a more immediate analogy with modern times, shall principally be attended to in the remaining part of my discussion.

In our British island, where the episcopal and presbyterian forms of worship are pronounced, by the supreme legislative authority, to be both equally true, equally orthodox while confined within their respective limits, far be it from me presumptuously to assign any general or unqualified preference. If a few cursory remarks on some peculiarities which are most prominent in the English liturgy, find admission into this discourse, let it be ascribed chiefly to temporary and local circumstances.

The authors of those devotional performances which received the national sanction in the sixteenth century, laboured under considerable disadvantages from not having sufficiently shaken off the trammels of Romish superstition. Be it allowed, that they inserted some vain repetitions, some assertions not warranted by scripture, and offensive to those of tender consciences. But let us also look at the fairer side of the picture: they were actuated by real piety; they wrote with an unaffected sense of their own fallibility, and a deep awe of the Supreme Being

to whom they were addressing themselves. Their memory is accordingly held in veneration by distant posterity.

While those around them, both statesmen and such ecclesiastics, as, like the unworthy ecclesiastics of all ages, had deeply immersed themselves in worldly splendor and politics, were acting with extreme harshness towards those who had left the fold ; the undoubted view of the compilers of the liturgy was, to conciliate separatists : they would have rejected with horror the very idea of insulting, and driving, by a series of persecutions, into distant, but more hospitable regions, those against whom they had repeatedly measured their strength in the fields of controversy, and from whom they had as repeatedly experienced a shameful discomfiture. What originally proceeded from them is at more unexceptionable than what they copied from mass-books and legendary relics.

Over the Athanasian creed I could wish to draw the veil of oblivion. The incomprehensible jargon of its doctrinal parts, contrasted with the abrupt precision of what are termed its damnatory clauses, not only gave just offence to the pious Tillotson, but it remains a stumbling-block at this day in the path of all who are at the same

same time judicious and sincere friends to the church. This creed, it must be admitted, has not wanted apologists : an advantage which, in our paradoxical age, is extended to almost every vice, and every absurdity. The reading it is, however, confined to only a few stated days ; and in many parishes, the good sense of the minister, and the disgust of his auditors, have conspired to lay it totally aside.

Of a widely different nature is the communion service appointed for Ash-Wednesday, when the season of Lent begins. It contains a solemn declaration of the wrath of God against actions flagrantly immoral ; the sacred records, which are appealed to, explicitly authorising all its assertions. Between the trinitarian and unitarian doctrines, the best and wisest of those who have accurately studied the scriptures may be, and, we daily see, actually are, widely separated in their opinions. But no good man, of whatever sect, will contend, that making the blind to go out of their way, or perverting judgment to oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and widow, is not odious in the sight of Heaven. Opinions on speculative points are frequently varying ; but the moral duties carry us onward in a strait line : all scandalous deviations from them are clearly discerned, not only by the believer, but

even by the infidel. Should what we fancy sound doctrine, ultimately turn out to be the mere building up of hay and stubble; should the guides we follow prove to have mistaken their way; let us always remember, that an upright conduct is the foundation of all religion —the rock which can never be shaken. At the last awful day of account, we are taught to expect, that the principal inquiry will be made, not into the soundness of men's faith, but whether they have lived according to the best of their knowledge.

The option given in the communion service, either to use a prayer, strongly asserting the divine right of kings, or to exchange it for one generally considered as far more moderate and less exceptionable, shews a degree of candour in times which have frequently been censured for their want of liberality; such as, if we judge from scenes immediately before us, it is easier to praise than to imitate.

Of all errors in offering up petitions to the throne of our Almighty Father, the most contagious seems to be, that of referring every thing to the passions, the prejudices, and crooked politics of the moment. If “ abate the pride, as “ suage the malice, and confound the devices”

of

of our enemies, were the stated language made use of by two adverse nations in every war, whether of aggression or defence, can it be supposed, that He who searcheth the heart will thereby be induced to acquit both, or either, of malicious arrogance?

Where the minister is at liberty to select his own expressions, it has, with appearance of reason, been frequently argued, that improprieties of this nature will abound. An assertion so plausible might pass unquestioned, did not recent experience convince us, that those checks which are imposed by a sense of decency and respect for the audience, operate with greater force where the terms of which a prayer is to consist are left discretionary. Uncharitable words no sooner escape the lips of a conscientious man, especially in the solemn hour of devotion, than, if allowed to do so, he feels himself inclined to retract them: but a prescribed formulary gives both the teacher and his hearers only this severe alternative, either to persist in the use of what they cannot approve, or to relinquish the communion of the church.

Be it supposed, for instance, that we term those with whom we are at variance, "the declared enemies of all christian states," merely

because they are assailed by a confederacy, powerful as that which the league of Cambray formerly assembled against Venice. The use of the word "apostates" is equally to be reprobated, where it cannot signify either a renunciation of the christian religion, or even any one of its various sects ; but denotes the placing all sects on a level, and taking away the titles and emoluments of those priests who refused to give such assurances, as were demanded from them of their obedience to the laws.

The faith of any church is of too sacred a nature for human institutions rashly to interfere with it : but the revenues of every church are subject to the control of the state. This assertion, though frequently cavilled at, has never been confuted, either by fanatics on the one hand, or, on the other, by the worldly-minded champions of the hierarchy. The gospel severely reprimands the hypocrisy of those blind guides, the scribes and pharisees, who decided, that, if men swore by the temple only, their oaths were futile, but that they were pledged to fulfil their vows when they added the gold of the temple. Not dissimilar to these, are expressions which we frequently have heard from the pulpit. It would be too glaring to lament, that a severe blow has lately been given to the church of Rome,

Rome, which our ablest writers have expounded to be the mystic “ Babylon, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth.” But over the diminished power and emoluments of the church of Rome, the wailings of some heterogeneous protestants are loud and implacable; even at a time when they find ample scope granted for those of every other sect to propagate their opinions.

By those virtuous reformers who perished at the stake in the reign of the English Mary, for having striven against the usurpations of Anti-christ, universal freedom of religion, granted by an extensive and warlike popish nation, would have been hailed as the most joyful of events. But those times are passed away, like a shadow that tarrieth not; and the practical remembrance of all that was done or suffered in them, is now, in a great measure, obliterated.

After the gift of miracles had ceased, with what astonishing rapidity did christianity diffuse itself through many countries, where it was not only unprotected by the civil power, but exposed to grievous persecutions? And shall we think so meanly of our protestant faith, as to affirm, that it is too feeble, without patronage, to advance itself in realms where the gospel is

already known, and those gross abuses, which had heretofore rendered it odious, are no longer sanctioned, either by terrors or rewards?—Let us entertain fairer hopes. Let us not uncharitably judge, that no motives, but such as have a mercenary tendency, are capable of efficaciously operating on the credence of the nations.

Much having been written on the ejection of ministers from their benefices in a neighbouring country, it may not be unseasonable to take a cursory view of what passed in this island during the last century, after the two following memorable periods, Charles the Second's restoration; and the Revolution, which, taking place when nearly thirty years more had intervened, established William Prince of Orange on the British throne. In the first instance, many learned and pious incumbents found themselves displaced, by what was termed the act of uniformity, because their creed did not exactly tally with that of the state. At the latter period, several of those who had sworn allegiance to James the Second, refused, after his abdication, to give the same solemn pledge of their attachment to another sovereign. On both these occasions, the government did not treat the sufferers with that liberality which might have been wished, by granting them a decent

decent subsistence out of their forfeited benefices. Notwithstanding this hardship, both dissenters and nonjurors conducted themselves in a manner worthy of imitation, if we consider them as large bodies of men. Whatever might be the conduct of some few individuals among them, by far the more considerable part, instead of migrating to any hostile shore, remained at home patient under their sufferings : unknown to them was the abominable system of exciting new crusades against their country ; or of practising, with a baleful perseverance in falsehood, on the ambition and credulity of those who humanely gave shelter to them.

One additional distinction yet remains to be made. Though considerably more than a hundred years have elapsed, since the "act of uniformity," as it was called, took place, no beneficial effect has yet been found from it : the separate places of worship which they whom the church violently ejected, were then under a necessity of resorting to, are still kept up ; a series of able ministers continue to officiate in them, and attract numerous and respectable congregations, though a variety of civil disqualifications continue to press hard on them ; while wealth, pomp, power, in short, every species of worldly attraction is held forth to their opponents.

nents. Amid penury and neglect, they persevere in retaining that freedom from bondage, of which their forefathers were so tenacious: they even yet stand firm: the water-flood, to borrow a scriptural allusion, hath indeed gone over them, but the deep hath not swallowed them up.

To the illiberal bigotry of those statesmen, who, following the fortunes of the second Charles, had for several years resided with him in popish countries, and thence imported all their intolerance, and most of their superstitions, may this rending asunder the veil of the temple, and disuniting protestants from protestants, principally be ascribed.

Among those whom civil policy removed from their congregations at the subsequent period of the Revolution, were some individuals of the most elevated stations, and not a few eminent for their literary attainments and moral character: but it was only during their lives that a separation on that ground could in any degree maintain its stability. When they sunk into the grave, they left behind them no successors; and even the name of nonjuror is now almost obliterated from the land.

Under

Under the Jewish law it was esteemed a profanation to bring to the altar any victim that exhibited outward blemishes.—How much more do rancour of heart and virulent language make that christian sacrifice, which ought to consist of a meek and quiet spirit, abominable in the sight of Him who has enjoined us to forgive our enemies, and do good to those that persecute us? Among those encouragements to various branches of duty, with which our Saviour opens his sermon from the mount, we find, “Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God.”

Very particular directions are given in the canonical epistles, concerning those ecclesiastical ministers whom our English testaments usually call “bishops,” though the obvious construction is “overseers;” and so we find the word rendered, in that passage of the Acts where a plurality of them is mentioned in the church of Ephesus. Among other qualifications essential to this bishop, overseer, or elder, call him which you please, we find it insisted upon, with much emphasis, that he be “no striker;” which, like the caution given by the prophet Isaiah, against “smiting with the fist of wickedness,” must evidently, from its context, be understood, as not merely prohibiting blows given with the

arm

arm of flesh, but all proceedings whatever, of an outrageous and oppressive nature.

Little can it matter in conducting a true religion, what name or rank the state assigns to those who officiate at its altars. The demeanour of men set apart for the worship of God, is a far more important consideration.—It essentially behoves them to know, that the kingdom of Him they serve is not of this world. But if, instead of joining with earnestness and true devotion in the prayer, “ Give peace in our time, “ O Lord,” they adopt the modern usage of exciting religious malice, by displaying consecrated banners, a ceremony unknown to primitive believers, which derives its origin from the dark ages, they must inevitably bring disgrace, not only on themselves, but on the faith they profess to inculcate. Men of weak understanding are incapable of making the distinction, and those of corrupt hearts have seldom any inclination to separate the priest’s misconduct, from the holiness of his profession.

There have been, and may yet again arise periods of time, when the man who loves mercy, and walks humbly with his God, incurs the charge of singularity; he either feels himself borne down by the violence of the torrent, or,

if haply he can turn aside, so as to escape it, is reduced to the painful alternative, of retaining his own opinions in silence and in solitude. Let him not however despond. It is often the lot of multitudes to take the broad road which leads to destruction. When the tempest most forcibly assails us, and no human succour is at hand, let us look up with confidence to Him, " who stilleth the raging of the waves and the madness of the people."

But if, wherever we cast around our anxious eyes, no better prospect offer itself to us, than that of a momentary sullen calm, while the louring aspect of the skies portends that the whirlwind is again rising: distressful as our situation must be, it ought not to be confounded with those who have no hope. Every step we take through this vale of tears, brings us nearer to that grave, where "the wicked cease from troubling, where the weary are at rest, " where they hear not the voice of the oppressor, "and the servant is free from his master." When the last trumpet shall rouse us from the dust of death, all we have undergone in this world will appear but as a fleeting dream.

The politician has sufficient scope for the exertion of his utmost abilities, in attending to the

the essential interest of the community to which he belongs, and, at the same time, to his own personal concerns. To the remotest countries, every man, whether placed in high station or humbler fortunes, owes the indispensable duty of benevolence; but all officious intermeddling with their conduct, every attempt to dictate to them in matters which belong not to our cognizance, must necessarily be attended with pernicious effects. The wholesome remark of Solomon is by no means grown obsolete: "Wisdom is before him that hath understanding; but the eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth."

Religion points out to us so direct a path, that honest intentions, accompanied by a stedfast purpose of mind, will be found sufficient to guard those of the meanest talents from falling into any essential mistakes, provided they attend to its dictates.

The prophet Joel's description of the miseries which awaited the Jewish nation, visited by devouring swarms of locusts, borrows its sublimest images from the baleful effects of war. The allusion is continued throughout with more than common energy. The desolate wilderness they leave behind them, cannot be more expressive

pressive of the ravages occasioned by those voracious insects, than of the havoc which war constantly brings with it—tearing the husbandman from his occupation, and converting the spade and plough into instruments of slaughter. War is naturally productive of famine; not only in those miserable regions which are the immediate seat of hostilities; they also share in the calamity, who, from some peculiarity of circumstances or situation, had flattered themselves with an idea, that they might be able to hurt others without endangering their own security. It cannot be too often inculcated, as a salutary warning, that the great and powerful Haman suffered an ignominious death on the very gallows which he had erected for Mordecai.

A variety of awful instances are given in the Apocalypse, of superior strength, actuated by unbounded malice. It is particularly observable, that, on the opening of the second seal, "power was given to him that sat on the red horse, to take peace from the earth; and that they should kill one another: and there was given to him a great sword."

Should motives of a more exalted nature prove insufficient to enforce our compliance with that charitable conduct, which our heavenly

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Father has prescribed as a rule for all our thoughts, words, and actions, let us reflect, that every curse we utter, every mischief we contrive against others, will probably revert on our own heads in this life, and most assuredly in the next.

A prophetical construction of the Psalmist's words, if it were admissible, might serve to close this discourse, with an important moral lesson: " As he loved cursing, so will it come unto him; as he delighted not in blessing, so will it be far from him; as he clothed himself with cursing, like as with his garment, so will it come into his bowels like water, and like oil into his bones; it will prove unto him as the garment which covereth him, and for a girdle wherewith he is girded continually."

THE END.